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**USSOF OPERATIONS IN AFRICA: PROSPECTS FOR
FUTURE ENGAGEMENTS IN THE SAHEL**

by

Ahmed Bakari, Group Captain, Nigerian Air Force

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Advisor: Dr Stephen Burgess

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Biography

Group Captain Ahmed Bakari is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Group Captain Ahmed Bakari serves with the Nigerian Air Force as a Provost (Security Forces) Officer. He graduated from the Nigerian Defense Academy in 1994 with a Bachelor degree in Mechanical Engineering. He also obtained a Master of Arts degree in Terrorism, Organized Crime and Global Security from the Coventry University, United Kingdom in 2011, and is an alumnus of the George C Marshall Centre for Security Studies, Germany. He served in various Nigerian Air Force Bases as a provost (Security Forces) officer and partook in various internal security operations. Before his nomination for the Air War Course in Maxwell AFB he was a staff officer in the Headquarters Nigerian Air Force, Abuja.



Abstract

As part of the Global War on Terror, AFRICOM was established to secure the US security interests in Africa. AFRICOM, through the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Partnership uses USSOF to engage Sahelian security forces, to address the threat of terrorism in the Sahel. This engagement is non-lethal, and relies on the synergy of the elements of diplomacy, defense and development for its successful implementation. Accordingly, USSOF undertakes training for Sahelian forces with a view to building the capacity and capability of local forces to degrade VEOs in the region. However, with the continued employment of USSOF in non-lethal roles, the threat of terrorism continues to increase beyond the capacity of Sahelian forces to mitigate. The inability of Sahelian forces to translate the skill sets from USSOF training into observable favorable outcome raises questions over the effectiveness of current USSOF engagement in the Sahel and the utility of USSOF non-lethal engagement in the Sahel. This paper argues that lethal military engagement by USSOF can bridge the gap resulting from the inability of Sahelian States to optimize the expected gains of USSOF non-lethal action in support of their counterterrorism effort. The paper identifies the need for USSOF to exploit the competencies of USAID, international organizations and NGOs in Sahelian States to act as enablers for USSOF's lethal action, thereby making USSOF engagement in the Sahel more effective.

Introduction

Since 9/11, the US, under the auspices of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) intensified its global military engagement to shape the international security environment, deter hostile regimes and rogue states, and address the root causes of terrorism.¹ Indeed, this engagement commenced with the use of a robust military force to defeat the Taliban regime and disrupt Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan. It also degraded Al Qaeda elements in Iraq who subsequently maintained alliances in other parts of the world.² Meanwhile, the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) continue to use drones and raids in counterterrorism operations in Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria.³ Absent the operational capability of terrorists to function in these areas, the ungoverned spaces in the Sahel region of Africa posed a potential haven for Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO) to organize, strategize and orchestrate attacks against the US- thus a US security priority.⁴ Equally was the concern that if the natural resources and energy potential in the region fell under the control of VEOs, it could threaten global security.⁵

AFRICOM was established to advance US security interests in Africa. AFRICOM utilizes US Special Operations Forces (USSOF) to undertake various military engagements in Africa. USSOF's engagement in the Sahel as opposed to Somalia is non-lethal and aimed at securing strategic partnerships and building the capacity of partner states to solve their problems.⁶ Within this operational context, AFRICOM annually conducts multi-nation exercises such as Exercise Flintlock - designed to foster regional cooperation among Sahelian states to adequately address threats posed by VEOs;⁷ and Exercise Obangame Express - to improve cooperation towards maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea.⁸ In the same vein, Military Information Support Teams (MIST) conduct capacity building training for law

enforcement and border officials, to enable them to engage the local populace effectively, interdict smuggled goods and leverage technological aids as force multipliers.⁹

These efforts notwithstanding, the lethality and operational capability of terrorists, militants, and transnational criminals in the Sahel remain worrisome,¹⁰ therefore, raising questions regarding the effectiveness of USSOF Operations in the region.¹¹ In contrast, USSOF lethal actions in Somalia have effectively countered Al Shabaab terrorists at little cost and lower risk to USSOF while equally reducing collateral damage.¹² These benefits bring to fore the utility of employing lethal action in USSOF's engagement in the Sahel. Thus, this paper seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of current USSOF operations in the Sahel, with a view to proffering recommendations for future engagements. The paper argues that lethal military engagement by USSOF can bridge the gap resulting from the inability of Sahelian states to optimize the expected gains of USSOF non-lethal action in support of their capacity for counterterrorism operations. Equally, while USSOF non-lethal actions should continue to leverage the political, economic and socio-cultural dynamics in the region, in cooperation with USAID, it needs to take advantage of the competencies of international organizations and NGOs in Sahelian states. These organizations have the resilience and experience to undertake enduring non-lethal initiatives that can act as enablers for USSOF's kinetic action, thereby making USSOF engagement in the Sahel more effective.

Accordingly, the paper will highlight the nature of the current use of USSOF in the Sahel, and examine the challenges that inhibit USSOF effectiveness in the region. Next, the paper will analyze the current ineffectiveness of USSOF concerning the Boko Haram VEO in Nigeria. Lastly, it will offer an outlook for future effective USSOF engagement in the Sahel, taking into cognizance lessons learned from other Special Operations Forces (SOF) operations. Whereas

there are different frameworks for assessing military operational effectiveness, this paper adopts the assessment of effectiveness on three conditions namely: the ability to degrade the attractiveness of terrorism and operations of VEOs;¹³ the ability to effect behavioral change among communities vulnerable to VEOs influence;¹⁴ and the ability to promote and strengthen military cooperation among states.¹⁵ Considering the expanse of the Sahel, and the different groups of VEOs therein, the paper's scope of analysis will be limited to the sphere of operation of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliate Boko Haram.¹⁶ Boko Haram, although contestable, is regarded as the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA).¹⁷ Notwithstanding the contention, this paper will use the entities interchangeably. While much focus will be given to Boko Haram's operations in Nigeria, limited examination regarding AQIM and counterterrorism operations in Mali will be made to support the paper's position. An appropriate point of departure for this paper is to determine what special operations entail.

Special operations lends itself to varying meanings and purposes. Some interpretations espouse its limited capacity to utilize direct or indirect military action to achieve operational or strategic objectives.¹⁸ Other interpretations attest to its unique superior capabilities which could be used unconventionally to achieve desired outcomes.¹⁹ These approaches both agree that special operations are consistent with a political focus, in ways that eschew risk, failure or exposure.²⁰ As opposed to kinetic actions by USSOF, the prevailing view has been to use USSOF in pre-crisis environment -*Phase Zero*, where US national planning efforts are primarily non-kinetic, aimed at capacity building of local SOF, training, capability development and cooperation with partner nations. This phase of military engagement, conceived in the early stages of the GWOT, seeks to prevent conflict and the Department of State and USAID are the lead agencies.²¹

Currently, AQIM operates across Algeria, Mali, Libya and other Sahelian countries while Boko Haram's operations span across four countries- Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. While the operations of ISWA create a perilous security environment with associated humanitarian crisis in the Sahel, the affected countries lack the capability and capacity to effectively address the threat.²² This situation clearly shows that the current security environment in the Sahel transcends the workings of "Phase Zero" conditions in which USSOF engagement in the Sahel continues to persist. Accordingly, this paper argues that it is necessary for USSOF engagement in the Sahel to shift to the second or third phases of the US military campaign spectrum which entails seizing the initiative and conducting decisive operations.²³ However, this shift will involve Sahelian forces leading the fight while USSOF provides the necessary lethal action to augment gaps in the capacity and capability of the local forces to effectively degrade VEOs. To appreciate the need for USSOF lethal action, and what capabilities need to be provided to support local forces, it is necessary to understand the challenges for current USSOF engagement in the Sahel.

Challenges for Current USSOF Engagement in the Sahel

The current USSOF engagement in the Sahel is non-lethal,²⁴ elaborate and has the potential to address some of the challenges posed by VEOs.²⁵ However, the engagement's effectiveness is tested internally by a mismatched balance of effort in the utilization of USSOF,²⁶ and the dearth of scalable and interoperable equipment for USSOF to exploit at the joint and combined operational environment.²⁷ Externally, the engagement is challenged by the inability of the benefiting countries to actualize the envisaged outcomes of USSOF's non-kinetic engagement.²⁸ US engagement in the Sahel is primarily through the Trans-Saharan Counter-

Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) whose strategy lies on the interrelated elements of diplomacy, defense and development.²⁹ Accordingly, a meaningful assessment of USSOF's engagement in the Sahel should account for the influence of these elements. Perhaps, the strategy's reliance on non-lethal engagement may arguably be a reflection of the Department of State's (DoS) control as the lead agency.³⁰

Under the TSCTP, USSOF engagement seeks to increase cross-border cooperation, information sharing, and counter VEO operations among Sahelian states.³¹ Besides Exercises Flintlock and Obangame, USSOF training includes basic soldiering skills, small-unit infantry tactics, and leadership training. Within the Lake Chad Basin where Boko Haram's operations are rife, USSOF focus further on building capacity, capability, trust and interoperability between USSOF and local military forces.³² USSOF also employs RPA drones, but are limited to Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) roles.³³ These laudable initiatives notwithstanding, Boko Haram's activity in the region now spans across four countries. The VEO holds geographical spaces and fights using conventional and unconventional ways. Equally, the extent of its violence, destruction and associated humanitarian disasters from its actions have deepened the tasks confronting host nation agencies.³⁴ Indeed, the operational environment where Boko Haram operates has morphed and metastasized in ways that the current pattern of USSOF engagement may not effectively address. Therefore, USSOF's non-lethal engagement in the Sahel misses to some extent the violent, and non-linear nature of war, which holds true for counter-terrorism.³⁵ Thus, some degree of kinetic action is required to resolve the challenges in the operational environment. Given the challenges, USSOF could conduct precision strikes against VEOs using drones, provide additional combat force protection equipment (MRAPs) with 12.7mm guns to boost the firepower of local troops, and explore ways to partner and

enhance viable efforts by Sahelian militaries. However, the use of kinetic action by USSOF comes with some challenges.

A fundamental challenge to USSOF operations outside the US, as evinced in the USSOF raid in Yakla-Yemen, is how to function effectively without generating or exacerbating anti-US resentments, and galvanizing new supporters and resources for VEOs.³⁶ In the Sahel, this challenge is worsened by the inability of the countries to project military power in ways that optimally synergizes the non-lethal supporting efforts of USSOF.³⁷ Military power infers a state's ability to convert existing elements of national power into additional military capabilities, and the capacity to generate additional elements of power which can translate into military capabilities.³⁸ Sahelian states lack sufficient troops and defense assets, they also lack the financial means to procure sufficient military hardware, and lack the technological expertise to produce indigenous military capabilities to meet their security and defense imperatives.³⁹

The inability to project military power could, be ameliorated by USSOF conducting kinetic action to support Sahelian forces, or providing hardware to boost the capacity for kinetic action by local forces. However, enhancing military power may be hindered by the weak political will and commitment of Sahelian states to cooperate. Indeed, this policy shortcoming has over the years, stifled the ability to fully actualize the desired outcomes from the acquired skill sets and competencies from USSOF non-lethal engagement.⁴⁰ Poor cooperation between Nigeria and Cameroon allowed Boko Haram to cross borders freely and observe operational pauses when its culmination seemed apparent and denied local forces the inability to pursue beyond their borders.⁴¹ Perhaps, USSOF could help coordinate the operations of Sahelian forces of the Lake Chad Basin states, as is the case in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic State.⁴²

Inadequate and obsolete equipment which is unable to achieve effective and efficient engagement, without some avoidable collateral damage makes counter –VEO operations by the Sahelian States challenging. For instance, the Nigerian Air Force lacks the ability to deliver precision munitions due to international political restrictions on procurement, and the dearth of local technological expertise to reconfigure its aged air assets to deliver precision munitions. Thus, weapons delivery is subject to the pilot's dexterity, which may be sub-optimal due to stress and fatigue. Equally, the Nigeria Army lacks sufficient armed Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs) to leverage the advantage of force protection to engage Boko Haram. Also lacking are thermal imagery night vision goggles to bolster night operations and updated maps of the operational area. Additionally, because the equipment of Sahelian forces come from different countries, there is the problem of interoperability of equipment for possible integration of USSOF in combined operations.⁴³ The continued implementation of the Leahy Act denies some Sahelian states the possibility of procuring modern equipment to improve their operational capability to counter-VEO. Indeed, Nigeria's bid to acquire twelve A-29 Super Tucano aircraft to boost its air operations against Boko Haram still faces strict opposition within the US Congress that gives more priority to pressuring for government reforms, ending corruption, and addressing human rights violations of Nigerian counterterrorism forces.⁴⁴ These restrictions weaken the capability of Sahelian forces and could have negative implications for the effectiveness of USSOF operations. Undoubtedly, resolving these challenges requires a diplomatic and political engagement between the US and Nigerian governments.

On the part of USSOF, fiscal constraints create challenges in the prioritization of limited available resources. SOCAFRICA is unable to provide robust ISR support and airlift in times of emergencies because it must compete with other commands for the needed military assets.

Additionally, poor infrastructural facilities in the Sahel exacerbate the problem of poor logistics to support USSOF operations in remote areas over extended periods.⁴⁵ Whereas MIST can offer technological expertise and support to boost capacities of Sahelian forces and create behavioral change in its targeted audience, the lack of predictive analysis tools for countering terrorists' web-based operations due to the VEO's ability to adapt its tactics continually challenges Military Information Support Operations (MISO).⁴⁶ Also, limited interactions between Sahelian militaries and their civilian populace inhibit effective messaging, thereby impeding the objectives of MISO - fostering trust, and building credibility to increase cooperation between Sahelian militaries and their populace.⁴⁷ Furthermore, there is the challenge of linguistic diversity, some languages are unfamiliar to USSOF.⁴⁸

Inflexibility in utilizing USSOF in line with the varying threats in the Sahel hinders USSOF effectiveness. A strong and more sophisticated USSOF is engaged in the hunt for the leadership of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).⁴⁹ While the defeat of the LRA is *quid pro quo* for Uganda leading the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the LRA does not pose the threat to US interests that Boko Haram does.⁵⁰ Thus, USSOF operations appear to be driven by politics or the capacity to undertake missions, and not necessarily based on a prioritized threat assessment. This perception from host Sahelian states faced with the threat of ISWA raises doubts over trust and commitment regarding USSOF's intentions and engagement in the region.⁵¹ Perhaps, with the expected completion of the mission of 100 US army rangers in Uganda on 25 April 2017, more USSOF elements could be committed to boost efforts in the Sahel.

Suspicion over US intentions creates barriers against seamless cooperation by some Sahelian states regarding USSOF engagements. This suspicion is mostly rooted in traditional

prejudices of past US commitments in other regions,⁵² and European colonial exploitation on the Continent.⁵³ Other suspicions are rooted in the host nation's desire for regime preservation and aversion to transparency.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding these obstacles, trust is key to any effective USSOF engagement in the Sahel. Trust would require a commitment to those fundamental reconcilable aspirations of Sahelian states to resolve their security challenges. For instance, Nigeria is actively fighting Boko Haram, but lacks sufficient modern military hardware.⁵⁵ With USSOF's engagement still limited to non-lethal action, and the US restrictions (Leahy Laws) on Nigeria to procure military assets for kinetic action,⁵⁶ there could be reservations regarding trust over USSOF's intentions.⁵⁷ In sum, the US would need to review its policy for military engagement in the Sahel to reflect a commitment to finding realistic solutions to the Sahel's security challenge. This review could lead to direct lethal action by USSOF to support Sahelian forces or account for alternative ways of enhancing the capability of Sahelian states to utilize lethal action to degrade VEOs.

A final challenge lies in reconciling USSOF's pursuit of immediate objectives, and the long-term nature of developmental efforts to engage societies holistically and build trust with local partners. USSOF's engagement in developmental effort distracts it from its primary responsibilities, thereby reducing its operational effectiveness.⁵⁸ Accordingly, USAID, international organizations, and NGOs need to lead and intensify developmental operations, and function within their unique rules of engagement that could be more efficient.⁵⁹ Given the thesis, the next step is to examine the performance of USSOF in the Sahel, using Nigeria's experience with Boko Haram as a study.

The Current Ineffectiveness of USSOF Against Boko Haram

It is common place to make assertions about the effectiveness or success of USSOF engagements using the number of training exercises conducted, the number of troops trained, forms of developmental assistance rendered and equipment provided. While these data provide the magnitude of engagement, they do not provide insights into the effectiveness of engagement in broader strategic terms, especially the cost-benefit analysis of the engagement.⁶⁰ A cost-benefit analysis of USSOF effectiveness should account for the financial, military, political and moral perspectives of the engagement.⁶¹ Degrading a VEO's operational capability and motivation, affecting behavioral change among vulnerable communities, and promoting and strengthening cooperation among Sahelian states are the frameworks upon which this paper assesses effectiveness.

A study on Boko Haram's attacks in Nigeria between 2007 and 2015 (Table 1), using the Global Terrorism Database of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), indicates a steady increase in attacks within the period of the current non-lethal engagement by USSOF in the Sahel. The study's findings use the conditions that incidents must be intentional acts or threat of violence by a non-state actor. Additionally, the incidents must *"be premeditated and aimed at achieving a political, economic, religious or social goal; have evidence of the intention to coerce, intimidate or convey some other message to a larger audience than the immediate victims; and deliberately target civilians and non-combatants."*⁶² Boko Haram's rate of attacks increased over the period, and the group developed the capacity to hold geographical space that indicates a rise in its operational capability.⁶³

VEO needs operational capability and motivation for a "cause" to orchestrate terrorism.⁶⁴ It therefore follows that although USSOF non-kinetic engagement was in place during the period

in review, Boko Haram's motivation to orchestrate terrorism did not diminish. While a US World Threat Report of March 13, 2013 identified extremist attacks in Nigeria and Mali as some of the key threats to African stability,⁶⁵ US and UN support for Nigeria was not on the scale of Mali. Even when Nigeria attempted acquiring US-made helicopters from Israel, the US blocked it.⁶⁶ Understandably, USSOF's focus of effort from 2007-2015 was on Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Notwithstanding USSOF's focus at the time, it is safe to conclude that the Nigerian forces did not translate the skill sets from USSOF non-lethal engagement into favorable observable outcomes.

In another study, some communities choose not to cooperate with Nigerian security forces out of the fear of reprisal attacks from Boko Haram, and the incentive Boko Haram provides them through the provision of "public goods."⁶⁷ However, a significant behavioral change occurred among the communities as evinced in the formation of local vigilante groups ("Civilian Joint Task Force") from communities affected by Boko Haram, who are working under the supervision of the Nigerian military, and now claim ownership of their security.⁶⁸ It is though unclear if this behavioral change is a consequence of USSOF's training received by the Nigerian military or sheer survival instincts within the affected communities. These contentions notwithstanding, it would be safe to deduce that within the period of USSOF non-lethal actions, there was a mixed outcome in the behavioral change of communities affected by Boko Haram.

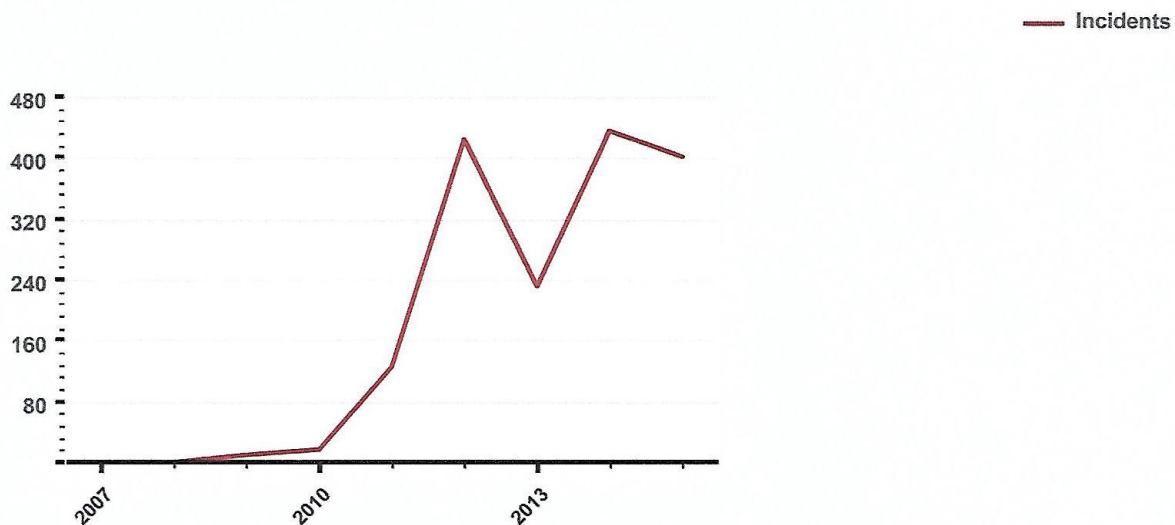


Figure 1: Rate of Boko Haram's Attacks in Nigeria from 2007- 2015 Source: START
2016

USSOF ISR missions provide immense intelligence for the MNJTF fighting Boko Haram. In Nigeria, this intelligence has been timely on the part of USSOF. However, logistics and operational challenges by Nigerian forces often impede quick and effective response. For instance, during Operation Crackdown, a USSOF drone spotted Boko Haram's build-up and advance, but, the Nigerian Air Force could not attack the VEO due to severe weather constraints for aircraft operations. Perhaps, if the USSOF's drone equally attacked the insurgents on sighting them, it would have achieved a more beneficial outcome.⁶⁹ In the same vein, while USSOF provided some MRAPs for the Nigerian Army, these vehicles came without the accompanying 12.7mm guns that would enable full exploitation of the benefits from the gesture.⁷⁰ It suffices to mention that currently Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) are Boko Haram's weapon of choice and a leading cause of casualties among Nigerian forces, who mostly utilize "soft-skin" vehicles for operations.⁷¹

If USSOF is to be useful in building operational capability, its engagement needs to be holistic - to include the provision of equipment, training on the equipment, and arrangements for acquisition of maintenance spares for the equipment. Adopting a comprehensive approach in the overall spectrum of USSOF's engagement in the Nigeria could bring about proficiency in the local forces, interoperability of equipment with those of USSOF, and better coordination among Nigerian forces. Indeed, this envisaged outcome portends a distinct advantage for USSOF engagement in the Sahel. From the preceding, counterfactuals present a correct approach to assessing the effectiveness of USSOF non-lethal engagement – what would have happened if USSOF lethal action was employed? While counterfactuals using a linear approach may be misleading, this paper is, however, optimistic that USSOF lethal measures in the Nigerian scenario would have been more effective in yielding better outcomes. How then can future USSOF engagements in the Sahel be made more effective?

Outlook for Future Effective USSOF Engagement in the Sahel

Effective USSOF engagement should do a better job of leveraging and working in concert with other spheres of the TSCTP as enablers to military power. Although military action can bring about short-term gains over VEOs in the Sahel, host nations and international organizations could provide the persistence for these gains to endure.⁷² Currently, three lines of effort define USSOF engagements to counter VEOs. First, there should be a commitment to assistance through a partner-unit capacity-building effort. Second, there should be shaping of the current effort in ways that create enduring relationships and advance US interests overseas. Lastly, USSOF should enable efforts of US partners through information sharing, “*and if*

necessary, accompany and augment their COIN capacity during operations.”⁷³ It is within the third line of effort that this paper advances USSOF’s pivot to lethal engagement in the Sahel.

Experiences observed during the French intervention in Mali and the Sahel – Operation Serval,⁷⁴ and USSOF operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen demonstrate the value of kinetic action to bring quick and decisive favorable outcomes in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations especially in semi-permissive environments.⁷⁵ Recently, the US extended the 9/11 authorization to step up USSOF kinetic action in Somalia against Al-Shabab.⁷⁶ This approach which is a shift in the employment of USSOF in Africa could be extended to the Sahel, considering parallels in the security threats posed by VEOs on the Continent. Thus, USSOF needs to employ kinetic action in its operations in Mali and Northeast Nigeria. This paper categorizes kinetic action by USSOF towards countering VEOs in the Sahel into two – direct and indirect actions.

Direct action entails using USSOF’s lethal capabilities to support Sahelian forces’ counterterrorism operations in furtherance of the TSCTP’s overarching objectives. Such capabilities would include but are not limited to, armed ISR and precision strike aimed at destroying opportunistic and predetermined VEO’s critical targets such as logistics support bases and Main Supply Routes. Boko Haram could undertake logistics resupply and deployment of its fighters at night because the Nigerian Air Force lacked sufficient capability to conduct counter air operations at night effectively.⁷⁷ This shortcoming attests to the presence of a capability gap which USSOF could fill by utilizing its drones in the kinetic role. The proposed establishment of a US drone base in Agadez, Niger although essentially for ISR,⁷⁸ also offers the potential to explore the use of kinetic action by USSOF to counter Boko Haram and other VEOs in the Sahel.

Drones offer an efficient way to conduct special operations with low potential political cost, in ways that are less intrusive to host nations while avoiding human casualties for USSOF. Equally drone operations can disrupt and degrade a VEO's decision cycle by eliminating their experienced leaders. Drones can also undercut VEO's freedom of communication, mobility, and ability to gather in large or open areas due to its extensive loiter time.⁷⁹ While critics argue that the use of drones for counterterrorism operations comes with high level of civilian deaths, such criticism misses the fact that the collateral damage from drone strikes is by far lower than that for other forms of air strikes.⁸⁰

The Nigerian Air Force has developed and operationalized its GULMA Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV),⁸¹ and possesses limited proficient UAV operators for its CH3 UAV.⁸² Future USSOF engagement could bolster Nigeria's efforts by providing training for Nigerian UAV operators, and support Nigeria's quest to develop the weapons system for the GULMA UAV to conduct kinetic action. Indeed, this could build Nigeria's capability to undertake kinetic operations against VEOs within her borders and across the Sahel, without generating or exacerbating anti- US resentments. Future USSOF engagements involving the use of kinetic action in the Sahel should also leverage local forces to undertake combat roles similar to US operations against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria,⁸³ and combined operations between the French and Chadian military in Operation Barkhane.⁸⁴

Indirect USSOF kinetic engagements entail actions aimed at facilitating the capability of Sahelian forces to bridge existing operational gaps to counter VEOs and undertake effective and robust kinetic operations. Accordingly, for future USSOF engagement to be effective, its needs to build trust through a commitment to support Sahelian forces. In major partner nations of the TSCTP, where it is evident that USSOF activities will bring about a net advantage in regional

security and US interests, USSOF would need to be postured to permit response in times of crisis or to opportunities that could accelerate achievement of US security interests.⁸⁵ For instance, France's propositioned forces in the Sahel enabled it to repel and decimate the VEO onslaught in Mali speedily,⁸⁶ although the VEOs revived and remain active in Mali and other countries. Posturing USSOF should integrate the diplomatic-political constraints faced by host states in the employment of USSOF and be incorporated into the overall annual review of strategic planning for the host countries.⁸⁷ Indeed, the fragmentation within Boko Haram's leadership, and the VEO's recent decimation by Nigerian troops,⁸⁸ though not total, portend avenues to explore such an engagement. Certainly, when guided by US policy, USSOF possess the capability to conduct lethal support missions with partner nations against regional insurgencies and can augment the exploitation of informational fissures between insurgencies and the local populace.⁸⁹ In sum, while USSOF engagement should strive to address the root causes of terrorism it needs to be able to provide punctuated interventions with military force when required.

Future USSOF engagements should seek to dominate and fully exploit the large utility available through the internet,⁹⁰ as well as possess the capacity for sustained operation within the "difficult" terrain abounds in the Sahel.⁹¹ Currently, Boko Haram can utilize the Internet for psychological and information warfare and possesses the resilience to survive in the under-governed spaces of the Sambisa Forest, using low-end technology.⁹² Indeed, it is possible to conduct kinetic operations in the cyber operational domain.⁹³ USSOF engagements should, therefore, leverage the expertise of MISTs to build and support the capacity of Sahelian forces for web-based operations. This advantage will enable the forces to disrupt the ability of VEOs to use the internet to facilitate communication, incubate and spread ideas, and serve as a catalyst for action.⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, to be effective, such an effort would require a commitment by host states

to institutionalize and sustain the capability for the long term.⁹⁵ Developing regional coordination centers which allow for combined training and synergy between USSOF and Sahelian forces is a means through which long-term capability could be achieved⁹⁶ The Nigerian Armed Forces Command and Staff College, which serves as a hub for training among mid-level officers from various Sahelian forces, is a potential institution through which such an initiative, in conjunction with the Joint Special Operations University, could be undertaken.

For effective operations, USSOF ISR and airlift capability need to be expanded, while SOF equipment holding should be inexpensive, scalable and capable of being operated on solar or low power generators. Such equipment would permit extended SOF operations in remote areas and ease of sustenance by host nation forces who usually lack the means to maintain large and expensive systems.⁹⁷ Working with allies especially the French who share historical and cultural footprints in a vast number of Sahelian states will be vital to effective SOF operations. The benefits of such engagement include the cultural and language expertise which the French can provide to compliment USSOF missions, and existing logistics, intelligence and medical networks that can support SOF kinetic operations.⁹⁸ Already, the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) currently fighting Boko Haram benefits from French intelligence and medical support.⁹⁹

Diplomacy's contributions towards USSOF's effectiveness in the Sahel are twofold. First, diplomacy can champion the cause for tweaking the application of the Leahy law to enable Sahelian states that have shown progress in conforming to the law to make inroads towards building military capacity to employ lethal action against VEOs effectively. Although dissenting views exist on the utility of providing military hardware for Nigeria's war against Boko Haram,¹⁰⁰ such dissent misses the potential of the process to pioneer and entrench a transparent

procurement system for Nigeria and other Sahelian states. It also neglects the fact that the process could provide the incentive for Sahelian states to increase the focus of their defense acquisition towards the US. Focusing on the US for security and defense procurement could in the long term improve the interoperability of equipment between USSOF and Sahelian forces during future engagements, and strengthen US leverage over the conduct of Sahelian forces in ways consistent with US values and interests.

Second, diplomacy must seek to bridge the dichotomy between it and defense regarding USSOF engagement in the Sahel.¹⁰¹ The application of US military force in the Sahel should be flexible to support the larger US political ends in ways that sustain a stable environment in Sahelian states for a continued trust-centric political interaction between host states and the US. For instance, during Operation Serval, the French utilized kinetic action as an immediate means to dislodge terrorists and destroy terrorist's haven, thus, restoring political stability in Mali with a view to exploiting the political stability to address the root causes of terrorism in Mali.¹⁰² In Nigeria, USSOF's engagement seems mostly skewed to the priorities of the DoS which emphasizes a diplomatic approach and eschews lethal engagement, even at a time when the operations of Boko Haram posed an existential threat to Nigeria.¹⁰³ Since it is inconceivable to engage a non-existing state diplomatically, USSOF engagement in the Sahel could take a cue from the French's model in Mali. This change would entail using lethal action when necessary to stabilize the operational environment, boost the exploits of Sahelian forces, and enable continued US diplomatic and developmental efforts. This would increase the potential for the effectiveness of future engagements.

USAID, international organizations, and NGOs can aid USSOF effectiveness in two ways - they can contribute to military action, and they can house direct military advantage.¹⁰⁴ A

significant difference between USSOF operations and that of these organizations lies in the perception of the operating environment. Whereas military action seeks to impose its will to defeat an adversary, international organizations and NGOs try to effect behavioral change to conflict across all actors, inclusive VEOs.¹⁰⁵ Given this variation, USSOF engagement should aim to benefit from the effect of the independent activities of these organization to counter VEOs, and need not set rules for them. Where success in the operations of these agencies leverages international law conventions that are consistent with Islamic law guidance for war and improves the behavior of VEOs to act in ways that minimize humanitarian disasters,¹⁰⁶ it could increase USSOF's effectiveness since the operational environment may tilt in ways making it possible to predict VEOs' behavior with higher certainty, thus, making USSOF capable of effectively imposing order over chaos.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, there is a legal obligation for non-state actors to act within international law. Thus, achieving this feat would require discerning the point of diminishing returns of international and developmental organizations' effort – knowing when their efforts become a “sword” and thus, counterproductive.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The Sahel faces simultaneously, varying security challenges that not only affect its local population but which portend the potential to affect other regions where US vital interests reside, such as Europe. The challenges in the Sahel create a “wicked problem” requiring a holistic strategy that is regionally integrated. The US has demonstrated an unprecedented commitment to address security challenges in the Sahel, with the creation of AFRICOM and TSCTP as the highpoint. However, US engagement in the Sahel is often viewed as that of one reluctant to take decisive actions to address the security threats in the region.¹⁰⁹ With a relatively

small AFRICOM, staffed mostly with non-combat operations experts, the US strategy for the Sahel remains fixated on long-term solutions that center around building stronger institutions that will address the challenges. As laudable as this strategy is, weaknesses in the capacity of Sahelian states have created a gap in the overarching US counterterrorism strategy in the Sahel as embodied in the TSCTP. While USSOF has over the years, undertaken incremental non-lethal roles in the Sahel, the operations of VEOs persist in the region with arguably increased operational capability and motivation. In the midst of this development, USSOF's terms of engagement in the Sahel remain unchanged without the inclination of the possibility for revision to deeper involvement in the region.¹¹⁰

In light of rising security challenges and the inability of Sahelian states to curtail these threats despite the extended period of USSOF non-lethal engagement in the region, it becomes necessary to explore alternative ways to ameliorate the security threat in the Sahel to a level that states can satisfactorily take ownership and resolve the problem. The use of lethal action by USSOF in the region, although a departure from existing patterns of engagement portends an interim solution to compensate for the deficiencies in Sahelian states to address the challenges posed by VEOs. The use of lethal action within the strategic framework of the TSCTP will, however, depend on diplomatic and developmental efforts to serve as enablers for its success. It will also require a review in USSOF posture in the Sahel and acceptance to prioritize military over diplomatic considerations when necessary. Indeed, in times of existential threat, the ability to concentrate decisive mass to undertake lethal action can offer immense benefit against an adversary.¹¹¹ If chance and uncertainty remain constant factors that a military force must encounter in war, then one must be creative in exploring ways and means to see through the fog and friction of war, in order to achieve the desired objective¹¹² – the effective employment of

USSOF to degrade and disrupt the operations of VEOs in the Sahel in ways that advance US security interests.

In sum, USSOF's engagement in the Sahel needs to incorporate lethal action to bolster the capability of Sahelian forces to effectively undertake counter -VEO operations in line with the overarching security interests of the US in the region. To achieve USSOF's employment as mentioned above, it is necessary to boost AFRICOM's capacity and capability to sustain extended SOF kinetic operations especially in remote areas, and augment host nation forces' kinetic capabilities. This capacity would require a USSOF posture that permits response in times of crises or opportunities that present potentials for accelerated achievement of US security interests. At the core of employing USSOF in direct or indirect kinetic roles is the necessity to tweak the laws that restrict USSOF kinetic action, and impede Sahelian states from acquiring the equipment to conduct kinetic operations. Akin to this, is the need to further expand the 9/11 authorization to include the Sahel. Indeed, USSOF kinetic action could leverage USAID, international organizations, and NGOs to serve as enablers that effect behavioral change and shape the operational environment to increase USSOF's effectiveness to impose order over chaos.

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